

**SERMON**  
**“Isaiah of Babylon: Grace for the Despairing”**  
**Isaiah 40 (selected verses)**  
**Sunday, February 19, 2023**

Two friends sat silently over their beers, each sunk in misery. Finally, one heaved a sigh and said, "You know, I wish I were dead."

The other sighed and said, "If only I felt that good."

Like these two friends, have you ever despaired? Has there ever been a time when meaningless and hopelessness seemed to pervade your spirit, and where you could not find light beyond the darkness? If so, then I have some great news for you; you are not alone. Many, if not all of us, have gone through such times; even our faith ancestors, the people of Israel, knew despair. Their beloved city of Jerusalem, as well as their temple, laid in ruins. All but the poorest among them had been taken into exile. To make matters worse, they knew that their exile was the just desserts for the sins they had committed. The prophets of Israel had warned that a day of judgment was coming when they would be held accountable for their injustices against the poor and the marginalized, for their false worship of other gods, and for their vain boasting in their own superiority. Even though these prophets were ignored and ridiculed, this day of judgment came, and the exile marked their own guilt. Now the scars of their exile weighed heavily upon their spirits. Their days were filled with emptiness. Their faith in God grew cold and faint. And their hearts were filled with despair.

But what they didn't know was that God had gone ahead of them into exile in Babylon. He had gone ahead of them in order to prepare the groundwork for a message of hope that would come from one of the greatest prophets of all time: the prophet Isaiah of Babylon. Unlike other prophetic messages of the past, there was no warning... no judgment. Instead, in Isaiah 40:1-2, God proclaimed an enlivening message of amazing grace and abundant good news: *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”*

God's promising word speaks hope. God's Word declares an end to the chains of exile, and declares instead that all prisoners of despair and judgment are now set free. Moreover, God's Word declares that their journey to freedom will be seen before the eyes of all of humanity, as a testimony for all of God's enduring and glorious grace.

In verses 3-5 of the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah the prophet describes how the wilderness itself will become transformed before their very eyes. Instead of a land of dryness and loneliness, God will make of it a place of welcoming beauty and streaming rivers. *“I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...,”* says Isaiah; *“to give drink to my chosen people.”* And when this joyous journey across the wilderness reaches its destination, and home is in sight, says Isaiah, then the people will raise their voices in praise to the God who fulfills their gracious journey.

Christian recording artist Phil Wickham in his song [This Is Amazing Grace](#) incorporates Isaiah's prophecy like this:

*Who brings our chaos back into order?  
Who makes the orphans a son and daughter?  
The King of glory, the King of glory  
Who rules the nations with truth and justice  
Shines like the sun in all of its brilliance  
The King of glory, the King above all kings  
This is amazing grace  
This is unfailing love*

Speaking of God's amazing grace and unfailing love many of us might be able to sing the words to John Newton's classic hymn Amazing Grace from memory; but how many of us know the story behind this beloved song?

Born in London in 1725, Newton was the only child of a sea captain and a churchgoing woman. His mother taught him to read the Bible and go to services, but she died when Newton was seven years old. His father and stepmother did less to keep him on the straight and narrow, and he got into trouble many times.

As a young man, Newton fell hard for a young woman named Mary, and when he was 19, while traveling to see her, he fell victim to pirates who forced him to join the crew of a ship, where discipline was harsh, and the food was bad and scarce. Once, when he tried but failed to escape, the ship's captain had him stripped and flogged. Later Newton was transferred to another ship, and he became involved in the brutal 18th-century slave trade. Newton became known for his wild behavior (he almost drowned after falling off a ship during a party) and for an openly mocking faith. He seemed as far away from God as he could get...

But God had other ideas.

In 1748, Newton was on board a slaving ship called the Greyhound. The ship was in bad shape. During a violent storm, it began to fall apart and take on water. A crew member was swept overboard. All night long Newton tried to keep the ship from going under. And he thought about the state of his life. He knew he had run from God, hurt other people, and made a wreck out of his own situation. Newton realized he might die in the storm. Would God still be forgiving, even after Newton had rejected Him?

At last, Newton recalled what his mother had taught him from the Bible: God loves to show mercy even to people who feel they are beyond redemption. Newton asked for God's help for the first time in years. He survived the storm.

It didn't happen overnight, but Newton's life began to be transformed. He learned to pray. He found friends who shared his faith and could help him understand how it applied to his life. Eventually he gave up his role in the slave trade and stopped sailing for a living.

In his later years, Newton became the pastor of a larger church in London, where he helped lead many people to the God he had once mocked. He was also active in the movement to abolish the British slave trade. When the prime minister appointed a committee to investigate the slave trade, Newton was a key witness. He explained the horrors of the industry from the inside out. His compelling testimony helped make the slave trade—and eventually slavery—illegal.

Writing about the hymn *Amazing Grace*, Abby Forton of Geneva College, located outside of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, says of the hymn: *“By looking within the hymn one is able to understand a little bit about Newton's personal conversion. Although every person's conversion story is unique, there is something about this hymn that remains relatable to Christians everywhere. Newton discusses where he was when he found God, or rather, when God found him. He was a wretch. He was lost. He was blind in sin...”*

*Continuing onto the second stanza, Newton writes that it was grace that taught his heart to fear the punishment of his sin and it was also grace that those fears were relieved. This precious grace appeared when he was standing in that vicious storm, the moment he first believed. Through the trials and storms of life, it is grace that brings us through life, and it is grace that will lead us home.”*

Who among us, like Newton himself, does not welcome a message of comfort when we find our own spirits weighed down heavily by anxiety and despair? Who among us, especially when we know the depth of our own sins and the guilt of our conscience, would not value the precious grace of God sharing words of comfort and consolation—where God seeks us out, not to judge us, but to “speak tenderly” to us, to nurture us back to wholeness and life, to set us upon a new path of righteousness and hope?

The Good News of Isaiah's prophecy is that God does not leave his people in despair; and judgment and death are never the last words. The last Word is always God's word of enduring grace. And we may count on the everlasting promise of that saving Word.